

## **06/19/2003 Entry: "Ohio Democratic Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur Raising Issue with Texas Republican Henry Bonilla's Latest Action"**

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Reuters) - A U.S. House panel on Tuesday abruptly barred the Agriculture Department from working on country-of-origin labels for meat at a time when the labels have attracted new backing because of mad cow disease in Canada.

The labels are voluntary now but are scheduled to become mandatory Sept. 30, 2004, as a way for American consumers to identify where meat, seafood, peanuts and fresh fruits and vegetables sold in grocery stores are produced.

The Republican-led House Appropriations subcommittee on agriculture voted, as part of a \$76 billion fiscal 2004 spending bill, to block USDA from implementing mandatory labels for meat and meat products. Other foods are not affected.

Subcommittee chairman Henry Bonilla, a Texas Republican, said the delay would give lawmakers and the U.S. Agriculture Department time of "air out" objections to the labels by retailers, meatpackers and some livestock producers.

The action angered some subcommittee members.

Ohio Democrat Marcy Kaptur said she intended to argue before the full committee for letting USDA proceed with writing rules for mandatory labeling, expected to be issued this fall. The House Appropriations Committee may meet next week to vote on agriculture funding.

"I believe consumers have the right to know where their food is coming from," said Kaptur. With consumer concern over a case of mad cow disease in Canada, the roadblock to labeling "seems oddly timed," she said.

The United States last month banned all imports of Canadian beef and meat products, pending Ottawa's investigation of the mad cow disease found in an Alberta cow.

Canada was pressing the United States to relax the ban, but some U.S. cattle-state lawmakers say it's too soon to open the border.

But Japan, a major customer for U.S. beef, has requested country-of-origin certificates beginning July 1 for its beef imports. Japan is worried about Canadian cattle shipped to American feedlots for fattening before the trade ban.

On the retail level, supporters of country-of-origin labels say the labels will be a selling point for U.S. products. Foes say it will be difficult and unduly costly to get the right label on foods.

"There's been a real sea change in support for this at the producer level," said Iowa Republican Tom Latham.

Bonilla said he acted on the "controversial, difficult" issue because the House Agriculture Committee wanted to review the law.

At the same time the subcommittee was meeting, the Agriculture Committee announced a June 24 hearing on country-of-origin labeling.

A lengthy hearing was planned with witnesses from USDA, livestock and produce groups, and trade groups representing packers, grocers and foodmakers.

Sen. Tim Johnson, a lead sponsor of the labeling law, said the House subcommittee acted unwisely.

"With the case of mad cow disease in Canada threatening to kick the legs from under consumer confidence in beef, this is irresponsible," the South Dakota Democrat said in a statement.